

## Scenarios for ethnological research

Lehtonen, Jussi 2016. Skenaarioita maaseudun palveluista. Kaupat, kirjastot, pankit ja postit historiasta tulevaisuuksiin. (English Summary: Scenarios of services in the countryside. Shops, libraries, banks and post offices of the past, present and future.) *Annales Universitatis Turkuensis C* 429. *Scripta Lingua Fennica* Edita. Turku: Turun yliopisto. 335 pp. Diss. ISBN 978-951-29-6599-1 (print). ISBN 978-951-29-6600-4 (electronic). ISSN 0082-6995 (print). ISSN 2343-3205 (electronic).

Studying contemporary phenomena using ethnological research is becoming increasingly popular including within the Finnish ethnological context. However, determining which ethnological viewpoints and sources may emerge through the lens of futures research remains a less studied research topic. Thus, Jussi Lehtonen's doctoral dissertation on mobile services in the countryside provides a new type of ethnological approach that combines ethnological sources and methods with futures research methods such as Delphi questionnaires and field anomaly relaxation (FAR) tables. This combination approach brings new elements to ethnological research forcing the analysis to include the possibilities of historically oriented knowledge alongside questions concerning the future. As such, Lehtonen's work becomes somewhat experimental as well.

Lehtonen raises three main questions in his material. He asks, first, what is the history and current-day situation of mobile services; second, what future possibilities and alternative mean-

ings do these services potentially carry in the countryside; and, third, how can the viewpoints and methods of ethnological and futures research merge and work together. That is, he not only problematizes future scenarios, but also seeks to examine how the two disciplines can be combined within in dialogue. How questions are framed is clear and quite visible both in the structure of his work as well as in the division of research between the two disciplines. Furthermore, the research process reflects this division whereby the ethnological process precedes futures research both chronologically and methodologically.

In this dissertation, the ethnological analysis is not the focus of the research but a tool and an analytical foundation for the future scenarios. The ethnological component covers the past context and contemporary situation, and each of the different services are handled separately looking for their historical traces as far back in the history as possible. For this, questionnaires, interviews, newspapers and journals are used. Lehtonen chose to focus on four different services, that is, shops, libraries, banks and post offices. Apart from mobile libraries, these services scarcely exist in contemporary society. However, given the main purpose of his research, it might have been more functional to examine these services more comprehensively together as he did in the futures component. Through ethnological analyses based on the idea of grounded theory, Lehtonen outlines five concepts or variables he has used to create scenarios. These include technological and environmental aspects, strategic planning and models of production,

changes in services, the need for services and economic factors.

For all its experimental nature, this research reverts to a fact-oriented research emphasis in its ethnological component. I would have liked to read more about the experiences, meanings and values individuals have associated with these services since they also create the basis (at least partly) for decisions we make for the future. As is, the ethnological source material is strong and extensive, and I would argue it also offers possibilities for a more interpretive reading as well. Yet, Lehtonen's enthusiasm towards mobile services shines thorough in the historical account of them.

The second analytical component of this work focuses on possible futures with the aid of a Delphi questionnaire circulated among 26 experts. This is followed by the FAR table, which is based both on the concepts defined using the ethnological analysis and the Delphi questionnaire. As such, the FAR table forms the bridge between the two components. Finally, the research results can be read as a total of six scenarios, presented both in the form of prose – or a story – and in a table.

As Lehtonen writes, much discussion has taken place within futures research about the suitable and most ideal time span for research. On the one hand, too short a period can lead to decisions being made too quickly given insufficient time to follow the effects of decisions. On the other hand, too long a time span can lead to knowledge that is too fragmented or to scenarios that are too stereotypical. Lehtonen himself sets the time limit for his futures analysis as taking place in the 2040s. This is somewhat confusing since the material – that is, the Delphi questionnaire – covers a time span of until 2020. To me, this suggests that the notions of the researcher alone play a very strong role in the creation of the scenarios.

For a reader with a background in European ethnology, the way in which Lehtonen guides the reader through the various methodological choices is valuable. The methods used in futures research are thoroughly explained for those previously unfamiliar with them. However, the point at which empirical data is transformed into scenarios is exactly where I would have liked even more concrete information to help me understand how

quite imaginative descriptions of possible futures obtained their ultimate shape. In particular, here, the ethnologically quite familiar method of self-reflection could have helped both the researcher and the reader to view more clearly the various phases in this process. Specifically, I refer both to the time span chosen and to the detailed descriptions of scenarios.

As Lehtonen writes, the researcher applying futures research methods must be creative when combining facts and interpreting sources. It is this creative process that requires more concrete reporting in the text. One example of this creative means of writing lies in the scenario for the golden membership that 'could cover all use of a mobile library from free coffee and buns to voice actor and author visits and from full copying services to novelty literature and massive data retrieval services'. This image is simultaneously both intriguing and puzzling. It illustrates many of the thematic aspects that arose from the material – such as an idea of the future replete with great technical breakthroughs, consisting of a society based on private sector business and where costs have risen remarkably – but the way in which different elements are emphasized seems to rely on the researcher's intuition. Lehtonen also evaluates the probability of different scenarios, whereby the likelihood of only one occurring is estimated as good in this case. I would very much liked to have also read about that next step: What could happen after these scenarios were formulated and who then becomes the actor?

In his work, Jussi Lehtonen covers three aspects of time: past, present and future. Through his research, he seeks to take part in the social discussion as an ethnologist. For him, futures research allows more possibilities to do so than do the more 'traditional' ethnological methods. Referring to Wendell Bell, Lehtonen views the aim of futures research as adding the power of humankind to influence the way in which our future takes shape. As I see it, this idea is also quite close to ethnological thought regarding rendering everyday life and its actors visible and bringing them along in social discussions.

However, the widening of the time perspective also brings new challenges. The many temporal

layers along with the wide selection of sources and methods create a certain thinness to the ethnological process and interpretation. Nonetheless, Lehtonen's work forms an interesting starting point from which to follow the ways in which various levels of time are included in ethnological research in future.

Whilst for an outsider the futures research component is sometimes difficult to disentangle, Lehtonen certainly makes an important point

with his emphasis. That is, maybe we ethnologists should learn to create clearer objectives in terms of our involvement in the decision-making process as well. We will certainly read additional works that combine these two perspectives. I would like to see what other approaches aside from futures research might allow for a greater emphasis on aspects of the future within the ethnological framework.

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